JOHN ROSS MCCONKEY

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(1902 -)

Mr. McConkey was born in Paia, Maui where his father, Dr. Wilbur Fiske McConkey, was one of four doctors practicing in that area at the time. He attended private and public schools on Maui and graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1928. On March 25, 1933 he married Gratia ver Mehr and they later adopted two sons, Leonard Harry and John Keith McConkey.

After working for several years as an electrical engineer in Tennessee and California, Mr. McConkey returned to Maui in 1934 to work for the Pioneer Mill Company. He was superintendent of its subsidiary, Lahaina Light and Power Company, from 1934 until his retirement in 1967.

Mr. McConkey relates his family's history and many anecdotes about life in general on Maui, as well as some of his father's experiences as a physician. He also pays tribute to the late David Thomas Fleming who, he points out, left a living memorial of trees that he planted on Maui.

Lynda Mair, Interviewer

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN ROSS MCCONKEY

At his Napili home, Maui 96761

March 1972

J: John Ross McConkey

M: Lynda Mair, Interviewer

J: Well, in 1896 my father, Dr. Wilbur F. McConkey, came to Maui. He was a doctor. He graduated from Rush Medical School and he was from Missouri. One of his classmates came down here and set up a practice in Wailuku. I don't know how he happened to come down, but then he got the idea of going over to Kalaupapa. He wanted to help the lepers, so to speak. So he wrote my father in Missouri and asked if he wanted to buy his practice. Well, it must have been a cold winter day because it didn't take my dad very long to make up his mind to come down here.

Now he was not married yet but he was boarding in the home of my mother's mother. My mother was a schoolteacher and they were engaged. And so when he got this letter he hurriedly took off for far-off Hawaii. In fact he went off in such a hurry that he left his final business affairs to be wound up by his future sister-in-law, my mother's younger sister who was more in the business world. And so she sold his team of horses and his equipment and so forth and he came to Wailuku and set up the practice there in Wailuku. [Mother: Mary Cunningham McConkey]

And then the following year he went to California and to Alameda and my mother came out there and they were married in Alameda and came down to Maui. It's interesting to note that they lived in that old house which is right next door to Good Shepherd Church, where the Singer Sewing Machine Company was, which is supposed to be the oldest building in Wailuku. I mean the oldest frame building in Wailuku at the moment. I don't know but that's what I understand. They lived there.

Dr. Aiken was the doctor at Maui Agricultural Company at Paia. In those days Maui Agricultural and H.C. & S. [Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company] were separate companies, although they were run by brothers, and they were all part of Alexander & Baldwin [Incorporated]. So Dr. Aiken died and so the job was offered to my dad and so he

moved to Paia.

And then in 1899 my sister was born in Paia and in 1902 I was born in Paia on June 16th. When my sister was a year old in 1900, my mother took her back to Missouri to show her off to the relatives back there. She went on the sailing vessel Lurline and it took three weeks from Honolulu to San Francisco with a year-old baby but she made it all right. Took her back to Missouri. I don't know how long it took to go back across the continent but it took several days by train. One interesting thing: the children of some of her classmates came to see this baby from far-off Hawaii. Well, of course, coming from Hawaii the baby should be Hawaiian and they were greatly disappointed that my sister was not brown. (Lynda laughs) So that is the start.

And then, as I say, I was born in Paia and I lived there. I was fourteen when we first went to the Mainland. When my mother graduated from this high school in Missouri, she was the graduating class and so she wanted her two children to graduate from this same high school. So we left in the summer of 1916 and went back there and entered this high school. My sister was ready for her last year and I was a couple of years behind. My sister graduated but I didn't because I was sick all winter. Now this has nothing to do with Hawaii but I'm going to tell you that as a matter of interest.

My dad, in the meantime, had gone back to Chicago to his alma mater to take some postgraduate work. We were living in Missouri and he was living in Chicago, but he came down to see me because I was sick most of the time and had to drop part of my courses and so for that reason, why, I never graduated from that high school. We went south to Tennessee. So much for that.

But anyway, I suppose you want some of my early childhood memories perhaps.

M: Yes, very much.

J: Okay. Well, in Paia, of course we lived in a big old plantation house. Well, let's see now. I won't try to do anything chronologically, perhaps, but some of my earliest memories: we had a little private school on the back porch of our house. I mean it was me and the next-door neighbor, Ruth Lindsay, who is now Ruth Baldwin. She's the widow of Edward H.K. Baldwin. She was six months younger than I was and we had this little school.

There was this woman who was a teacher who had contracted diabetes. In those days they didn't have insulin and the only thing you could do for diabetes was diet and have some doctor available. Well, my folks felt sorry for her so they took her in and in lieu of her board and keep

and so forth, why, she taught us at this little school. My sister had gone to a school where a lot of other students were. So she taught this school and that was my earliest schooling--kindergarten and first grade.

In those days we had no refrigeration; we had no electric lights; and we cooked with a wood stove. The wood was brought down from up in the Makawao region in big ox-carts. They'd have anywhere from six to ten pair of oxen yoked to these carts and they'd come lumbering down the road. The driver didn't ride the cart, he walked. And then as they came down the hill he'd have to put on the brake so that the loaded cart wouldn't run over the oxen.

M: Were these logs or already chopped up wood?

J: Well, it was what you might call cord wood. It was about four feet long, ready to be cut up and split. In those days, of course, the plantations had all sorts of perquisites, as they did up until quite recently. One of the doctor's perquisites was free wood and we had a wood stove and the hot water was heated by the wood stove and we did all the cooking on it. Our cooks made our bread. We had Portuguese cooks and they made good old Portuguese bread but, kid-like, we didn't properly appreciate this Portuguese bread, we preferred the baker's bread. Once in awhile we'd run out of homemade bread and we'd have to go and get baker's bread, much to my mother's disgust but much to our delight because it was different. (Lynda laughs)

We had no refrigeration so out in the trees in the backyard we had a screened in--we called it a food safe. It was hanging from the tree so that dogs or cats or anything couldn't get to it. Up in Makawao, Kup Choy ran a slaughterhouse and so once or twice a week he'd bring meat down and hang it in this food safe. Of course we'd have to cook it right away and then after it was cooked we couldn't keep it too long without refrigeration. And of course our butter was always about the consistency of Wesson oil. (chuckles) I mean in summertime it was.

One of the doctor's perquisites in those days was a cow. We didn't own the cow but when a cow came fresh they would bring it to us and we would raise the cow and get all the milk. And then when the cow began to go dry we'd swap it in for a new cow, and so we always had all the fresh milk we wanted and the cream. We never made butter; we always bought butter but we had all this milk and cream and stuff to use "as is."

Of course in the early days my dad made his rounds in a horse and buggy or he rode. He had a little mule that he liked to ride. It was a very easy-riding mule. We had

this big house that was on a lot of perhaps an acre or two acres--I don't know--and then we had a barnyard of two or three acres and a great big barn with accommodations for about eight horses, I guess it was, plus two or three carriages and things of that ilk which we used for transportation. My sister and I each had a horse and we'd ride to school on a horse. I mean after I started going to an outside school.

Talking about the schools, I'll digress a minute. In upper Paia, above the Makawao Union Church, the parents started a little school because in those days the public schools were geared to the laborers who did not speak English in the home and the kids usually came to school barely speaking English. And so for those of us who were raised in English-speaking homes we'd be held back, so they had this private school and they hired a teacher. It started out as a one-room school and then as more kids grew up it became a two-room school. So after my preliminary private school instruction on the back porch, why, we went to this Paia Private School, my sister and I both.

M: What was it called?

J: It was called the Paia Private School. And then in, I think it was, 1914 they decided to start Maui High School which was to be later on what they called English Standard schools. Our school, then, dissolved and we all went to Maui High School which started out with grades one through eight, as well as the high school, only they didn't have a full high school class until about the third year, I think it was, and then they started graduating students. Well, as I say, my sister went for the first three years there and then she went to Missouri. I graduated from grammar school from a high school. (Lynda laughs) So much for the schooling.

But we'd ride our horses to school either at the private school or then when the Maui High School was started at Hamakua Poko we'd ride over there. See, the plantation was very stretched out and of course they didn't have the transportation facilities and so they had dispensaries in many of the villages all over the plantation. Hamakua Poko was one of the larger villages and so my dad had a dispensary there. He'd go there once or twice a week, maybe oftener if necessary I suppose, but in the meantime, when the Paia Hospital was started they would bring the patients in to the Paia Hospital rather than have the doctor go out there and then they'd go through the dispensary at the hospital.

So a great deal of the time it just so happened that they'd be going over to Hamakua Poko to pick up people right about school time. They had an ambulance at the

hospital which was rather a primitive ambulance but it carried quite a few people.

M: What was it, a big cart or something?

J: Well, it was a good-sized car with just a couple of benches on the sides. We would ride the ambulance to school and we'd pick up several of our friends who ordinarily either walked or rode horses. Me, being the doctor's son, I was privileged and so I sat in the front. It had a hand-cranked siren and so I made with the big siren (laughter) as we went to school. There were no laws against sirens. That was one of our great joys, to go to school in the ambulance, as well as a number of our friends that lived nearby. Of course nobody lived very close together. I mean, there was half a mile to a mile distance between the nearest people.

Going back to the hospital, my earliest memory is that the hospital was a more or less converted clubhouse down in lower Paia down near the mill. But my dad had visions of a modern hospital so--I don't know if it was one year or two years or three years--every scrap of paper in his pocket would have some little rough architectural drawing of some idea he'd suddenly gotten for the hospital he hoped to build. Finally they decided to build this hospital and it was based on his designs, the things that he wanted, and was he proud of that hospital. That was the Paia Hospital.

Later on, when they discontinued the hospital, that became a children's home. Of course it's all torn down now and in sugar cane. That hospital was located about a half a mile below the Makawao Union Church. That hospital was his pride and joy. It was built in 1910.

And then he also had visions of a place for TB patients and so he, in consultation with Harry Baldwin, who was the manager of the plantation, and a number of the other public-spirited and public-employed personnel finally started the Kula Sanitarium. When it started out it was just a few tent-cottages. They'd build a wooden floor and some wooden sides and put a tent over it and those were the wards and the homes of the resident nurse and so forth. But they had no resident doctor so my dad had to go up there and be the doctor.

M: It sounds like he was a very busy man.

J: Oh, he was a very busy man because he. . . . (recorder turned off and on again) I hope I'm not talking too long.

M: No, no, no. No.

J: As I say, he'd go up there and by that time, why, he had acquired an automobile. His first automobile, which he acquired about 1907 or 1908, was a Stanley Steamer and it was the twelfth automobile on Maui. (Lynda laughs) Harry Baldwin, the manager of the plantation, had the eleventh which was also a Stanley Steamer. They were quite proud of their vehicles. He was able to go to Kula then, although the roads were lousy, and he was able to cover his plantation duties as well. He was the only doctor in that whole area.

At that time, they had one doctor for M.A. Company [Maui Agricultural Company] at Paia; they had one doctor for H.C. & S. at Puunene; and Wailuku Sugar [Company] had a doctor. Then I think there was another one in Wailuku. If I'm not mistaken, at one time there were only four doctors in all of Central Maui. Then there was one over here at Lahaina and one at Hana. These doctors worked seven days a week and my dad, anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours a day, 365 days of the year. Very seldom could he take off because there was nobody to take his place and there was always some emergency coming up.

In those days, of course, the roads left much to be desired. And in those days my dad, as well as the other doctors, made house calls--plenty of house calls. People always got sick in the night and babies always came in the night. This steam car took about an hour to get up steam.

M: (laughing) You're kidding! You had to go out and wait an hour for the thing to . . .

J: Yeh, so you didn't just jump in the car and take off. So if he got a call at night, if it was nearby it was a lot quicker to harness up a couple of horses and go by horse vehicle than to wait because he could get there and get back before the Stanley Steamer was steamed up; but if it was quite a far distance, then he would sit and twiddle his thumbs while the Stanley Steamer got its steam up and then he would be able to get there quicker. And of course, after you got up steam, then you could keep the steam going. When he came in at night, why, he'd turn off the fire and let the steam out and then it would cool down. And then if he had to go, then he had to heat it all up again but after you had it heated up then you could just get off and go right away. So that was his mode of travel--either horse or automobile--at that time.

In many ways he liked a team of horses because, working the kind of hours that he did, he was always sleepy. He had the ability of taking a catnap at any time of day or night and waking up quite refreshed, so he'd go out on a house call and he'd start back home and he'd just take a nap and the horses would bring him right home. (Lynda

laughs) He didn't have to steer the horses but he did have to steer the automobile. Of course the people that he ministered to were very appreciative. One reason he was never a success was because all of his private practice, why, if somebody didn't pay he wouldn't think of suing or really getting after them; he'd just dwindle along and forget about it and so they were always bringing him presents.

One night in particular he'd gone way up into Kaupakalua, which is up above Makawao in case you don't know--beyond Makawao. I think it was a baby case, but anyway he was there quite awhile and so the old Japanese man wanted to show his appreciation in some way. By that time the Stanley Steamer had graduated from kerosene lights to acetylene lights. They had a gas generator on the running board and you put acetylene in. When you mix acetylene and water you get acetylene gas which burns in a gas flame. That was before the days of compressed gas, so he had this gas generator on the running board and when you wanted lights, why, you'd get out and open the water and the water would drip down on the acetylene and the gas would form and go in a pipe to the headlights. And then you'd get out, whether it was raining or clear, and light your headlights in the wind and rain with a match. (Lynda laughs) The taillight was a kerosene light.

So this grateful patient or husband of a patient wanted to help the doctor. All he knew about was kerosene lights, so he went out and very carefully filled the acetylene gas generator with kerosene. And so when my dad came out, he couldn't get up any gas so he had to drive all the way home from Kaupakalua in the dark.

M: Oh gosh.

J: But of course he knew the roads well. I don't think there was much of a moon. That I don't recall but I do know that he came home slowly that night and I'll tell you he didn't nap on that trip. He got home all right but how he did it I don't know, except that during the war I had to drive in a blackout. I thought about him every time I drove in a blackout during the [Second World] War.

He also had a motorcycle and he used to make some of his calls on a motorcycle. I think once or twice he tried to go to sleep on the motorcycle and that wasn't very successful so he discontinued that. (laughter) But he did have to take his catnaps all the time.

And then later on the next vehicle he got was a Bendix, gasoline-driven. Oh, that was wonderful because you could start right up and go. Of course you had to get out and crank it by hand, and it was chain-drive and the chains were always coming off so you'd go merrily along on a

trip and all of a sudden a chain would come off, so he'd stop and get out the tools and put the chain back on again and then go about his business.

The first time I ever went to Honolulu I was ten years old. No, it must have been earlier than that because we got this Bendix about 1909, I guess it was. Anyway, in those days you went to Honolulu by steamer and you went either from Kahului or from Lahaina. People preferred to go from Lahaina because the trip was much shorter and it was much smoother because coming down this Molokai Channel from Kahului was really rough. So the first time I went to Honolulu we went by way of Lahaina. I was going down with my mother, so my dad brought us over here and, then I guess and always, the steamer came in around midnight. In order to be sure and catch that midnight steamer, we left Paia at six o'clock because we knew we might have to stop and fix the car and all sorts of things might happen. Well, we got here in plenty of time--we didn't have too much trouble--and I got on the steamer.

One of my earliest memories of Lahaina and one of the most pleasant memories that I still recall every time I'm on a boat: it was a beautiful clear night and the street lights of Lahaina along the waterfront shining out on the ocean was really a lovely sight and that's something that sticks in my mind.

Catching a midnight boat then, rather than trying to drive back to Paia at that hour of the night, my dad would put up at the Pioneer Hotel. Of course there were lots of mosquitoes in those days and they had mosquito netting. So one night--I don't know whether it was that night but at least one night--he went to bed and the mosquitoes were really bothering him. Of course you didn't have Flit or anything like that in those days, or any sprays, so he tried to kill the mosquitoes as best he could but there were several holes in the mosquito netting over the bed. He didn't have any safety pins or anything but he did have some postage stamps, so he gathered the mosquito netting up as best he could and stuck postage stamps on it. (Lynda laughs) He often wondered what the chambermaid thought the next morning when she found the mosquito netting all plastered with postage stamps. But at least he managed to block out the mosquitoes and get a few hours of sleep before he had to take off and go back to Paia.

The next car he got was a Kissell car. All of these cars, of course, are not made anymore and a lot of youngsters have never even heard of them. It was also a gasoline car and he was quite happy with it. And then he got a Hudson. By that time cars were getting more popular and we needed a family car, as well as a car for him, so he got another Hudson--a little Hudson roadster, as it was. That was number 212. That was two hundred cars later than

his first car. That was about 1914 or 1915. Getting up in years.

In 1916 we left the Islands. We left in the summer; my dad left later on in the fall. And so he determined to drive from the West Coast to Chicago. In those days that was a feat. Today you think no more of driving that way than you would of . . .

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So he drove that way but in those days they didn't have interstates' [highways]. This route they called the Lincoln Highway, which was an optimistic name because part of it was dirt road and winding and so forth, but he managed to get to Chicago with this car. And of course it was a great marvel to see a car with a license from Hawaii. Of course it was not a Hawaii license because in those days each county had their own licenses. It was not a state license or a territorial license; it was just a Maui license. You didn't buy a license plate; you were assigned a number and you used your artistic ability to make a license plate to suit you. (Lynda laughs) Most people would get a piece of wood and buy these aluminum figures like you can still buy and just put them on there. It didn't say Maui or anything; it just said 212 or 12 or whatever it might be. One of his friends was interested in this hammered copper so he made him a fancy license plate for this little car which said Maui on it. Of course everybody saw that and they wanted to know all about it so he told them.

My dad was quite a practical joker and he could tell tales with a very straight face, and so in San Francisco or on the West Coast and, in fact, other places too they'd say, "Oh, from Hawaii. Where is that?" Then he'd point out where it was. "Well, how did you get the car across?" So my dad straight-facedly would say, "Well, I waited till the ocean froze and I drove over." (Lynda laughs) And the funny part of it was it was believed.

But that was echoed now much later in--oh, when was it?--1938, I think it was. We went to the Coast after we'd been down here and we drove back East and I was in Mississippi somewhere and the car was parked across the street from where I was and there were a couple of colored boys walking down the street idly and they looked. "Hawaii! I wonder how they got the car across from Hawaii." The other fellow said, "I think they've got some kind of ferries running between Hawaii and the United States." (Lynda laughs) As I say, I thought of my dad's early experience.

Now let me see. What else could I dig up, dredge up out of the past? Well, of course this Stanley Steamer

which we got when I was a tender age, my dad was very proud to let me drive it occasionally--I mean with him sitting beside me--but in those days the seats were not adjustable so he'd put his medicine chest behind me. The Stanley Steamer, you didn't have to shift gears. There was a lever on the side that you'd let more steam to it, you see. There was no gear shifting. Like a locomotive, you just open the throttle and you'd go. So I took the greatest delight in driving it a few places on good roads, but without much traffic it didn't make much difference.

In those days, of course, the horses were terrified of automobiles and so you'd be driving along the road and some vehicle with one or two horses on it there, so what you'd usually do: you'd stop the car and then the fellow that was in the horse-drawn vehicle would get out and lead his horses past that automobile.

M: Oh really?

J: Because otherwise the horses would be terrified. If the automobile was going and the horses were going, they'd get terrified and bolt and run away (Lynda laughs), so they had to be very careful about that.

Ah, what else now?

M: Where did you graduate from high school, then? You didn't graduate back in Missouri before you came back here.

J: Oh no. Okay, if you want my educational background. (to his wife) What, Mommy? (she says, "Don't leave out about the kahunas.") The what? (she says, "Your Dad and the kahunas. The kahunas praying some of your father's . . .") Oh, yes, yes, yes. I'm glad you mentioned that. I'll cover that too.

Of course when he came things were much more primitive than they are now, and although the Hawaiians were Christianized way back in the middle of the last century, a lot of them still believed in kahunas and there were still kahunas and he had several experiences with that. One time in particular there was some man who came to him and he said he was being prayed to death. Well, my dad said, "Now that's all in your mind. There's no basis for that. Just forget it." Well, the guy couldn't forget it. And so he was supposed to die on a certain day or at a more or less certain specified time, so my dad, I guess, thought maybe he might work a little psychology on him. I don't know, but anyway, at that time my dad had an office in our home as well as other places all over the plantation and this man was there and the time was drawing near. They were talking about this, that, and the other. And then some big excitement, a fire or something, occurred

and everybody was excited and running around and involved in this fire. I don't know whether it was a jumped cane fire or just exactly what it was but it was something like that anyway. Whatever it was, it lasted long enough till it got past the time when this individual was supposed to die. My dad was watching his watch and so he said to the fellow, "Well, you see, the time is past and you're not dead. My power's greater than the kahuna's." So that guy was convinced but a lot of others were not. He had several instances similar to that but this particular one sticks in my mind.

M: Did people actually die?

J: Oh yes. Sure they did. Of course it's just the old mind-over-matter deal and if you believe in it enough you can be prayed to death without any trouble at all. It was just like hypnotism. You can be hypnotized too. And I suppose that praying to death is a form of hypnotism in a way. I don't know. I won't delve into psychology--I'm not a psychologist--but I do know that he had lots of experiences that he was not able to stop.

So in 1916, as I say, we went back to Missouri and my sister graduated from high school but I couldn't finish, so we had to seek a warmer climate for poor little me. I think that's one reason that I still hate cold weather to this day and I wouldn't live in a cold country for love or money. [Sister: Virginia McConkey La Rue]

So we moved to Tennessee because in Maryville, Tennessee there was a college--Maryville College--which is oriented with the Presbyterian Church. It was a very good school and they had a preparatory department. So my sister entered Maryville College and I entered the preparatory department of Maryville College. As I told you before, I graduated from grammar school from Maui High School, so to continue the cycle or complete the cycle I graduated from high school from Maryville College. (Lynda laughs) And then financial troubles overtook us and so I dropped out of college after one year.

M: Did your father go back to Tennessee with you?

J: What's that?

M: Was your father in Tennessee or was he here?

J: No, he was in Missouri at the time. There'd been a slight separation, so to speak. And so we were living in Tennessee and I dropped out of school and went to work. Four years later, after working for four years, one of my buddies. . . . We'd moved to Knoxville, which is the seat of

the University of Tennessee, and one of my buddies who had been working too decided to go to the College of Engineering at the University of Tennessee. So I drove him to the school and he was in there talking to the dean, so all of a sudden I said to myself, "Why, you damn fool. Why don't you go back to school too?" So I got out of my car and went in and propositioned the dean and that fall I entered the University of Tennessee and eventually I graduated. I graduated from a university from a university. I always wanted to graduate from a university from a kindergarten but I never made it. (laughter) So that is my educational background.

So having graduated, I went to work in East Tennessee but I never gave up the desire to come home because I hated cold weather. Even Tennessee was too cold for me. Of course in Tennessee it gets down to zero and all that sort of thing. It doesn't get twenty below like it does in Missouri and colder than that like it does in other places that I have never lived. So periodically I would write back here to various companies to get a job and I didn't happen to find anybody that was in need of help.

After working in Tennessee for awhile--I was in the power plant of a rayon factory in Elizabethton, Tennessee--a buddy of mine was coming out to California and he was going to get into aircraft instruments. So he talked me into coming out to California. I had worked with instruments in power plants and so forth. It was a very light transition; I had to do a little studying.

So I went to work. I was in Glendale with this friend and working there and then we decided to go to Alameda. They had an airport in Alameda, which is now a naval air station. But anyway, it was a private airport in those days. And so we went up there and we went into business for ourselves and we had a little aircraft instrument shop there. [Wife-to-be: Gratia ver Mehr]

My wife-to-be was the secretary to the manager of the repair part of the airport. She graduated from business college in the Depression and so jobs were practically non est [nonexistent]. People didn't go on relief like they do now; they did their best to work. So she tried to get a job. Well, she couldn't get a job without experience and she couldn't get experience without a job. (Lynda laughs) It's kind of a vicious circle.

So a good friend of her brother was head of this aircraft repair depot so she said, "Could I work for you for nothing for three months and you give me a recommendation?" Well, he was tickled to death because he needed somebody and he didn't have any funds to pay her. So she was the unpaid secretary and I was the aircraft-instrument guy starving to death in the shop next door. So she used to do typing for me. Eventually everybody in the airport had

us married before we were even engaged. (Lynda laughs) We finally became engaged but things were so tough we decided to wait.

The day [President] Franklin Roosevelt closed the banks we said, well, this is the bottom of the Depression so we'll get married. (Lynda laughs) Of course all the banks were closed. By that time she was working for pay but nobody could cash a check because the banks were closed. But somehow or other, she had some money. So she and I and a couple that we'd palled around with went out on a night on the town and spent her money, hoping that the banks would open eventually and we could cash a check and repay her, which we did. We were married about a year later [on March 25, 1933].

Periodically I would write back here for a job. After we'd been married for about a year, I was working by that time for United Airlines in Oakland. I was aircraft instrument man for United Airlines. That was before United came to Hawaii. They decided to move their main repair base to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Of course Cheyenne is really a god-forsaken climate. They used to say, around the airport group, that instead of a wind sock at the Cheyenne airport they put up a log chain and the rate at which the links snapped off was an indication of the velocity of the wind (Lynda laughs) because the wind was blowing this log chain out straight.

Well, I had no desire to go to Cheyenne so again I wrote to Hawaii--wrote to Pioneer Mill Company--for a job. One day a letter came from Pioneer Mill. Gratia [ver Mehr McConkey] was at home and she opened it up and it said, "Report for work as soon as possible." Well, she was on pins and needles and so she called me at the airport and said, "Mr. Moir says okay," because at the airport they had a telephone girl who might have overheard what she had to say. So I tried to get through the rest of the day walking about three feet off the ground.

The next day, then, I went to my boss to tell him that I was going to quit and come down here. Well, this was one of the most unusual things because before I could start quitting he said, "Well, Mac, we've decided to give you a raise." I said, "Well, gee, thanks but I've decided to resign." (laughter) So anyway, we resigned and came down here. That was in 1934. I worked for Pioneer Mill and its subsidiary, the Lahaina Light and Power Company, until I retired in 1967.

M: Is that where you knew Bucky and Bella, in Lahaina here?

J: Pardon me?

M: In Lahaina here, is that where you knew Bucky and Bella

[Mair]?

J: Well, yes. We knew them, though not too well, in Lahaina when Bucky worked for Baldwin Packers which is now part of Maui Pineapple Company. Then he went to Ewa Plantation. Harry Taylor, who had been the assistant manager at Pioneer Mill Company, went to Ewa Plantation in the same capacity so Bucky was working under Harry.

The McConkeys and the Taylors had been great friends in Lahaina and we continued that friendship through the years. The Taylors' daughter Tinker--Leslie Valentine Taylor--was only two months older than our oldest son Leonard Harry (Heymac) McConkey, so we spent most of our Christmases together. Hence, in Ewa we became much better acquainted with the Mairs than we had been in Lahaina. The Harry in our son's name came from Harry Taylor, I might add.

I think I've about run down. (Lynda laughs)

M: How many children do you have?

J: We have two [Leonard Harry and John Keith McConkey]. Both of our youngsters are adopted. Oh yes, during the [Second World] War they moved the hospitals. See, the Lahaina Hospital was right on the waterfront, near where the Lahaina Shopping Center is now, so they moved up to Lahainaluna High School and took over the high school. Then the hospital in Wailuku, which has now become the Maui Memorial [Hospital], they moved that up to what was then the Fred Baldwin Memorial Home [for the aged]. It's now a dormitory for Maunaolu [College].

So they moved all the old men from Fred Baldwin Memorial Home to Lahaina and quartered them in the Pioneer Hotel because in those days there were so few tourists that the Pioneer Hotel usually had maybe one or two guests at a time. So they moved all these old men there. And then the hospital was moved up there, so my oldest son was born in a girls' dormitory at Maunaolu because that was where the hospital was up there.

And so the Taylors' daughter was born in a boys' dormitory because the private rooms and delivery room were located there at Lahainaluna High School. (Lynda laughs)

So my oldest boy carried on my tradition of doing things differently and, like my graduation, he decided to be born in a girls' dormitory. And then our youngest son was born up in Berkeley, [California].

M: (to Mrs. McConkey who asks, "Would you like some coffee if I brew it?") Yeh, I would.

[Several paragraphs on this page were revised by JRM, 1981]

J: My oldest son was working in Honolulu. He was in the Army. He volunteered in the Army while he was going to San Jose State and so he spent some time in the Army and he was sent to Vietnam and so he came back one of these shell-shock cases. He was in a mental hospital and then last November or December he suffered a relapse and so he's now in the [Hawaii] State Hospital but he's getting along fine and they're going to do a good job on him this time. Before, they turned him loose too quickly and without medication.

My youngest son is in Florida. He was in the Navy. He volunteered for the Navy and so he was headquartered over in the Atlantic instead of the Pacific. I guess that's typical of the Armed Services, you know. A kid from Hawaii, why, they'd put him in the Mediterranean and a kid from New York City, they'd put him over here in the Pacific somewhere. So anyway, in Florida he met and married a very charming girl and they have one daughter. After he got out of the Navy they came down here and he worked here for awhile but his wife, being from Florida, and there weren't the jobs then that there are now--I mean the opportunities--and so they went back to Florida. And so he's been working in building mobile homes. Of course his aim in life is to come back here and build mobile homes, which are illegal on Maui (laughter) and in most of Hawaii, I guess, and so he's stymied for the time being but he hopes to come back here eventually.

So I have two sons and one very beautiful granddaughter who is about six years old now.

Oh yes, that's another thing. This place. I told you about our place out here. We lived in Lahaina for many years in plantation homes on the waterfront in Lahaina. So I had an opportunity to buy this lot out here [in Napili]. [David Thomas] D.T. Fleming was the manager of the [Baldwin Packers] pineapple company out here in those days and he was very hepped on people owning their own home. Not only should they own it, but they should actually build it or help build it. That was the epitome of the way things should be, so he made property available to his employees so that they could buy it and build their own homes. He had these lots here.

There were five lots in a row here [on the water] and then there were some lots across the street there. His son [David Thomas, Jr.], who worked for the pineapple company, bought the first lot. I don't know whether he really wanted to or whether he was pressured into it. Then next door to him was the industrial relations man for the plantation. He bought one. Now whether he really wanted it or was pressured into it, I don't know. But anyway, the rest of the lots--this lot where we are right now--went begging. This next-door lot went begging.

So I happened along at the right minute and of course he [David Thomas Fleming] was a great friend of my father's and we told him we wanted to buy this lot. "Well," he said, "I think I can sell it to you." He was playing the canny Scotsman, as he was, and so he said, "I'll let you know. I'm pretty sure. You can go out if you want to and fool around with it."

And so on Sundays we'd come out. Sunday afternoons. We loved to come out here and we'd quite often bring our supper and our drinks and sit down on the rocks here and eat, but before that we'd do some clearing on the land and we'd plant some trees. That went on for months. He'd drive by on Sunday afternoons and see us zealously working so he decided, I guess, that we were really interested in the lot because he didn't want you to buy lots for speculation. He wouldn't sell you two lots. One lot, that's all you need for a home. So finally one day his office called up and said, "How do you want your deed made out?" (laughter) So we bought this property and we were very, very pleased to get it and very fortunate.

M: Before I forget to ask you, what was your mother's maiden name?

J: Oh. Mary Cunningham. And she came from Bethany, Missouri which is way up in the northwest corner of Missouri, right next to the Iowa line. My father came from Albany, Missouri which is right in the next-door county. Albany was the county seat of Gentry County and Bethany was the county seat of Bethany County and both of them touched the Iowa line, so the families knew each other. As a matter of fact, there was some distant relationship because my grandmother's maiden name was McConkey. She was distantly related to my father--some kind of an umpteenth cousin or something.

M: Your father and mother never came back here.

J: No, not after we left. We left in 1916. They never came back. And of course we came back. My sister [Virginia] married and settled in East Tennessee and she still lives there; and she and her husband have visited us a couple of times but, oddly enough, she's happy there. She's got a lot of friends there and I don't think she'd be happy moving back here.

M: I don't think you gave me her name either.

J: Oh. Virginia La Rue is her married name. She married a fellow who I knew in school. He and I went to school together. He didn't graduate. He had to drop out because

his father died and so forth; but anyway, we went to the University of Tennessee together. He was with a power company back there and I was with a power company down here.

Originally the Pioneer Mill Company had a subsidiary, the Lahaina Ice Company, which sold electric power to the town of Lahaina--the non-plantation employees. They sold power directly to their own employees in those days. The pineapple company out here had their own power plant and they sold power to their employees. It's interesting to note that when I first came to work for the Lahaina Ice Company we did sell ice, we sold soda water, we sold electric appliances and did electrical wiring and all that sort of thing, but our main excuse was as a power company. When I came here [in 1934] the main substation for the town of Lahaina was half as big as the substation for even one of the smaller hotels in the Kaanapali area.

END OF SIDE 2/1ST TAPE

BEGINNING OF SIDE 1/2ND TAPE

When I returned to Lahaina in 1934 this was Baldwin Packers, which was a separate company from Maui Pineapple [Company]. It's now a unit of Maui Pine. It was a separate company and they had their own power plant up in the hills. It was a hydroplant, quite small, and they did not have any meters on the houses; they just charged a flat rate. And so, if you had just lights, why, you'd pay so much a month. And then when you got up in life and got an electric refrigerator, you paid more; and if you got a washing machine, you paid more and so forth and so forth.

M: It would depend on how many appliances you had?

J: Yeh, because there were no meters. Every night at nine o'clock they turned the power off, so everybody ran their refrigerators wide open all during the day, you see. They'd turn the cold control just as high as it would go and the refrigerators would run like mad all day long and then they'd defrost every night but at least they kept your food cold. A great many people didn't bother to turn their lights off. When the power plant man pulled the switch, then the lights went out; and when he started up the next morning, the lights came on and woke you up, so that was your alarm clock. (Lynda laughs)

This hydroplant, which is way up in the hills--when there wasn't enough water coming down in the ditch, it would not produce enough power, so they finally made a connection with Pioneer Mill Company's power system and when there wasn't enough water, then they would switch

over to Pioneer power. So Pioneer was buying water from the pineapple company. Due to a design in the power plant, if there was too much water they got too much turbulence and they couldn't produce enough power either.

M: Where was the water coming from?

J: It's the Honokohau ditch. It comes from Puukukui, which is the second wettest spot in the world where there's a rain gauge, next to Mount Waialeale on Kauai. You see, that ditch will run--when it's really raining up there, you may get as much as eighty million gallons a day. And a real dry summer, when there's no rain, no rain, no rain, I've seen it down to around eight million gallons a day. Well, when it gets down to eight million there wasn't enough power for them, but when it's past sixty million, due to the turbulence in the power plant they couldn't produce enough power. So when they couldn't produce enough power they'd switch over to Pioneer power, so they had a very elaborate contract.

Pioneer Mill Company bought water from them, up to sixty million gallons a day I believe it was. Something like that. So if the water was low, then they'd have to go on to Pioneer power so they would pay Pioneer so much per kilowatt for that power. But then when the water got too high and they couldn't produce enough power, then Pioneer was getting that water for nothing and so they in return were getting power for nothing.

So one of my early jobs when I came to work here: we had a recording meter which would record the kilowatts that they were taking at any given time during the whole month. It was a whole month's chart. So I had to correlate that chart with the water chart. And so, from eight to nine today the water was above the minimum, so between eight and nine all that power was free. So I'd have to make out a report showing that there were so many kilowatts at so much a kilowatt and there were so many kilowatts free. (both chuckle)

But let's go back still further, when I was a very small boy. In those days I think it was called the Honolua Ranch and originally they did not raise pineapples. That came a little bit later, but the first thing, they raised cattle and coffee. They had out at Honolua Bay a warehouse where they stored the green coffee which they shipped. A great deal of the green coffee they would put in small boats out there at Honolua Bay and take it out to the inter-island boats just like they used to take the sugar out, you know, from outlying ports to the inter-island boats.

As I said, David Fleming was a great friend of my father's and so when he moved over here we used to come over

and visit them. At that time they lived up in what is now the Pineapple Hill Restaurant so we'd visit them there. One of my early memories was of going down to the coffee warehouse. The warehouse wasn't any bigger than this living room here but it was a high stack of green coffee. The Flemings' sons, Dr. Jim [James] Fleming on the other side [of the island] and David Fleming who lives here and Bruce Fleming who lives over on the other side and another and then some girls, although they were younger than I was, why, we'd play together. We'd get on this high pile of coffee and slide down. (Lynda laughs) Coffee beans are like ball bearings and so you could really slide beautifully on them. You couldn't do that on a gravel pile but on a pile of coffee you could really slide. So that was one of the early things that we used to do.

My dad would come over here and go hunting with D.T. Fleming and they'd have a great time shooting pheasant and plover and doves around here. Old Man Fleming knew this place like the back of his hand and he was a wonderful person. A great deal of the trees that are up here that are not indigenous, he is responsible for. He planted groves of koa up here. One of his ideas of a vacation was to go to some far-off country to go hunting, and then he'd come back and bring various exotic plants. He was also with the Board of Forestry and Agriculture so that everything was checked out, that it wouldn't be something obnoxious or that would have diseases or bugs on it, and then he'd plant them here. I think he was responsible for bringing in Haden mangoes and he was also responsible for bringing in lichees.

It used to be that the largest mango orchard in the United States was right up here and they used to actually can mangoes when the pineapple cannery was in Lahaina. In the pineapple season they'd can mangoes there and they were delightful mangoes too. Of course it was a lot of handwork and so they were quite expensive and that's one reason, I guess, they never went. But the main thing was that they can't depend on mangoes to be consistent. I mean this year you have a beautiful mango crop and next year you'll have a dozen mangoes. That's the reason they finally discontinued the mango orchard.

He used to have an arboretum up here in several of these valleys where he'd bring in these exotic trees and plants. I went up there one time with him and he showed me a plant that he'd brought back from the Holy Land which he said was the original crown of thorns, and one could believe it because this was a plant with thorns an inch to an inch and a half long, but it grew sort of like a bird nest, so to speak. You could cut that plant off at the roots and take it off and you'd have a ready-made crown of thorns. He claimed that was the original crown of thorns

that was used to put on Christ's head and I can believe it because all you'd have to do would be to take your sword and cut that thing off at the root, turn it upside down and jam it on a man's head, and you wouldn't get poked. Now if you tried to take a thorn bush and plait it into a crown, you'd have more thorn pokes than the person who got the crown of thorns.

That was one thing he had up there. And then he had several other trees. For example, he had one tree which was some kind--I'm not sure what it was. I think it was a form of South American mahogany. Anyway, it had a leaf that looked like a tobacco leaf.

And so one time there was a young scientist who had just come down to go with the Pineapple Research Institute in Honolulu. He came up here to look over the pineapple plantation here, so Dave Fleming took him up to his arboretum and showed him things and this one tree he called Hawaiian tobacco. It was not Hawaiian tobacco. There was no such thing as Hawaiian tobacco and this tree was not indigenous to Hawaii anyway but that was his name for it. He had his pet names. And so then this scientist perked up his ears. Old Man Fleming was a great practical joker and so he proceeded to elaborate on this Hawaiian tobacco and this young kid took it all in.

So he goes back to Honolulu and tells these other Pineapple Research Institute guys about this marvelous Hawaiian tobacco that Dave Fleming showed him that he'd seen up here and they said, "Were you talking to Dave Fleming?" And he said, "Yes." And they said, "Well, that's one of his standard jokes." Well, this poor kid had majored in tobacco in school, and then to have his leg pulled like that and go off and expose his ignorance, well, he wouldn't speak to Dave Fleming for a long time. (chuckles)

And then he had one tree up there that had a beautiful flower with the most horrible stench. He would call that, depending on who he was talking to; if he was talking to one of his Portuguese friends, he'd call it a Portaguee orchid; if he was talking to one of his Japanese friends, he'd call it a Japanee orchid. (Lynda laughs) When it was in bloom, he loved to go up there and kind of go upwind and show this friend and tell him that was, as I say, whatever the friend's nationality happened to be. And of course the guy would kind of perk up, you know--it's kind of an honor. He'd gradually work around downwind (laughter) and when the guy got the stench of this thing, then he was completely disillusioned.

So he planted, as I say, all sorts of things here and he was really responsible for a great deal of the beauty of these islands--of these mountains here. And he needs no man-made monument because you can point to these groves of trees up here. He even tried redwoods and he tried

cork trees. You can point to those as a living memorial to D.T. Fleming who was, as I say, a great man and I have a great deal of respect for him.

M: When did he die?

J: Hmm. I couldn't tell you exactly but, oh, I would say twenty years ago. [March 22, 1955] But I have nothing to tie it to. Both he and his wife died not too far apart.

Loyalty, for example: he had an old couple who had been working for them up here and living up there--there was a cook and a yardman and so forth--for a long, long time. And so finally they got old and decided that they would retire, so they retired and moved down below with some of their relatives. Then Mrs. [Martha Foss] Fleming died, so this little couple decided that D.T. needed somebody and they came back and worked for him until he died, because his wife had died so he needed somebody to look after him. That's loyalty. You don't find that kind of loyalty today.

But things have really moved. Now take Mala Wharf, for example, which is built right near. . . . You know in Lahaina where the old cannery was? You haven't lived here, have you?

M: (no audible response but the answer is No)

J: Well, in Lahaina there was the pineapple cannery and more or less right near to it was Mala Wharf, which was built before we came back but not too many years before we came back. The engineers that designed it [figured that] it was going to be fine. The Matson [Navigation Company] boats were going to come in and they'd load pineapple and they'd load sugar there. Originally Pioneer Mill Company had its own private port out here at Kaanapali right where the Sheraton-Maui [Hotel] is. Right where the Sheraton parking lot is was one of the main oil tanks that fed the fuel oil for the plantation power plants, so right below there they had this landing. The Matson boats couldn't tie up to the landing but they'd anchor out and then they'd load the sugar onto the lighters and take it out to the boats. And so they would do the same thing with the canned pineapple.

Well, they decided to build a pier in Lahaina where the Matson boats could come right alongside and they could load everything much more easily, so they built Mala Wharf. All of the oldtimers said, "There's currents there. You cannot tie a ship up to that wharf." But these guys from elsewhere said, "Oh, you don't know what it's all about." So they built Mala Wharf and the first boat that tried to tie up to it was an inter-island boat and it darn near

pushed the pier over. So they never used that pier. There were two small inter-island boats that would tie up to the buoys about ten feet from the pier, and so they would unload small freight onto the pier and then they'd take small freight from the pier onto the boat, but big stuff still came in to Kaanapali. The sugar and pineapple were both shipped from Kaanapali and the molasses was shipped from Kaanapali and the fuel oil came in there.

M: It didn't work out like the malihinis thought it would.

J: No, it didn't work out. Of course when I was a kid, why, the pier was the one right in front of the Pioneer Inn in Lahaina, right where the Carthaginian is tied up. In those days they'd bring the boats in. They didn't even have motor launches when I was a kid. They had big, strong Hawaiian seamen on oars and so they'd bring these longboats in--the whaleboats, I guess you'd call them--to the pier and you'd get on there with your luggage and then they'd row you out to the boat. And when you came in, why, you'd get on at the boat and they'd row you in to the pier. [Pioneer Hotel is now the Pioneer Inn.]

Of course Hawaiians are wonderful seamen anyway and these Hawaiians just knew every port in the territory like it was the back of their hand, so to speak, but sometimes we had awfully rough weather so a few times these rowboats would overturn. I remember Emma F. Sharpe's sister, Margaret--Margaret Bruss. This was before my time but not too long before my time. She had been to Honolulu and one of the things she'd gotten was some new glasses. So she was coming home and it was this rough weather. They thought they could make it in and they would watch the breakers and come in, you know, more or less like a surfboard. But this one missed and it turned the boat over and all the passengers and their luggage were dumped into the ocean (Lynda laughs) and Margaret lost her brand new glasses.

M: Oh dear.

J: But the saddest thing was an old couple who lived on Hawaii. They had saved their money and were going back to Japan to live, but they had some friends or relatives here on Maui. So they were on the boat going to Honolulu to get on the boat to go to Japan, and so they came in to the Lahaina pier and that same thing happened. They were both drowned so they never got to spend their last days in Japan. (counter at 326)

END OF INTERVIEW

Re-transcribed and edited by Katherine B. Allen

NOTE:

p. 1 Mr. McConkey recalls that Dr. Aiken had two sons--Dr. George Aiken, "the only dentist on Maui for many years; and Worth Aiken who was with the old Baldwin Bank (now First Hawaiian Bank)." There was also a daughter, Irene, who "was quite mechanically inclined and used to help brother George work on his old Ford car."

p. 2 Mr. McConkey and his sister attended Bethany High School in Harrison County, Missouri. He did not quite complete his second year of high school there before going south to Tennessee, "a much warmer and better climate."

p. 3 According to Mr. McConkey, "every plantation employee, from the newest laborer to the manager, received his periodic ration of wood."

p. 5 (bottom of the page) Oh, he was a very busy man because he was not only the plantation doctor, the Kula Sanitarium doctor, the government physician, but later on he became the doctor for the Haiku Fruit and Packing Company in Haiku. In his spare time he had a few private patients. He signed birth certificates, death certificates, and even pulled teeth in emergencies.

p. 13 John T. Moir, Jr. was the manager of Pioneer Mill Company. Mr. McConkey says, "I told him I was coming home and he, having been here, was very happy for me," referring to his United Airlines boss.

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THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In May 1971, the Watumull Foundation initiated an Oral History Project.

The project was formally begun on June 24, 1971 when Katherine B. Allen was selected to interview kamaainas and longtime residents of Hawaii in order to preserve their experiences and knowledge. In July, Lynda Mair joined the staff as an interviewer.

During the next seventeen months, eighty-eight persons were interviewed. Most of these taped oral histories were transcribed by November 30, 1972.

Then the project was suspended indefinitely due to the retirement of the foundation's chairman, Ellen Jensen Watumull.

In February 1979, the project was reactivated and Miss Allen was recalled as director and editor.

Three sets of the final transcripts, typed on acid-free Permalife Bond paper, have been deposited respectively in the Archives of Hawaii, the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawaii, and the Cooke Library at Punahou School.